

QUEST N. 6 - REVIEWS

Asher Salah, *L'epistolario di Marco Mortara (1815-1894). Un rabbino italiano tra riforma e ortodossia* (Giuntina: Firenze 2012), pp. 269.

This latest work by Asher Salah (Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem) is an interesting contribution to the understanding of the religious and cultural history of Nineteenth century Italian Jewry: a field of research that has not yet been sufficiently explored, since almost all of the available studies focused on the political and social aspects of emancipation and integration, relegating religion to the background. The volume is published in the series “Quaderni di Materia Giudaica,” directed by Mauro Perani, president of the AISG (Italian Association for the Study of Judaism) and full professor of Hebrew at the University of Bologna.

Born in Viadana (near Mantua) in 1815, then part of the Habsburg Empire, Marco Mortara lived a very sedentary life, never going far from home. He studied at the Rabbinical College of Padua, where he graduated in 1836, and was called to occupy the rabbinic chair of Mantua in 1857: a position he would never leave. His education in Padua tied him very tightly to Samuel David Luzzatto (ShaDaL) (1800-1865) and his teachings. Mentor and pupil later remained in close contact, as is made evident by the letters they exchanged in the following decades. From these premises originated Mortara's rationalist attitude, his deep hostility towards any cabalistic influences in Jewish rites and *siddurim*, and his explicit dislike for the cabbalist Elia Benamozegh (1823-1900), a famous, influential and controversial figure, rabbi in Livorno. Married to Sara Castelfranco, Mortara had four children, among which the jurist and future Senator Lodovico deserves a special mention. Salah appropriately emphasizes that Mortara's life and work was situated at the “‘hinge’ between two generations” (p. 16), in a context in which young people were identified as the champions of assimilation and total abandonment of Jewish life and culture, while the older ones were described as the representatives of a *ghetto* mentality. The rabbi of Mantua participated with great enthusiasm in the cultural and religious laboratory that sought to outline a future for Judaism and Jews, their relations with progress and modernity, the new national (and nationalist) context, within a State inspired by liberal principles. Among his best-known public statements we find *Il matrimonio civile considerato giusta le norme del diritto e dell'opportunità* (1864) [Civil Marriage analyzed through the rules of law and opportunity] and *Della nazionalità e delle aspirazioni messianiche degli ebrei. A proposito della questione sollevata dall'onor. Pasqualigo* (post 1873) [Of the nationality and the messianic aspirations of the Jews. On the problem raised by the Member of Parliament Pasqualigo], with which he took part in very lively political debates. Among his scientific writings, the most relevant is the biobibliographical volume *Indice alfabetico dei rabbini e scrittori israeliti di cose giudaiche in Italia* (1886) [Alphabetical index of rabbis and Israelite writers of Judaic things in Italy]. In 1855 he published his *Compendio della religione israelitica metodicamente*

esposto ad uso dell'istruzione domestica e delle scuole [Compendium of Israelite religion methodically exposed, to be used in schools and domestic education], a new catechism that was his contribution to the fervent discussion on the education of the younger generation of emancipated Jews. He wrote on all major Italian and European Jewish journals, but despite being in contact with intellectuals like Moritz Steinschneider, he remained always a rather marginal figure. Relatively influential in the context of the Italian rabbinate of his time, Marco Mortara represents well its limits and provincialism. Not able to read German, he had a second-hand and mediated knowledge of the great European cultural revival and biblical studies, of all the research and interpretations linked to the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and according to Salah his mastery of French was also quite precarious. For a scholar of Jewish culture, Bible and religion this might be disappointing, but for a historian of Italian Jewry in the age of emancipation and integration these are important data, that shed light to some aspects of the process of the integration of the minority.

The volume (with a Preface by Mauro Perani, pp. VII-XIII) contains the edited text of 205 letters, of which 162 are written by Marco Mortara and 43 were sent to him by his various correspondents, between 1831 and 1890. Most of this material - retrieved by Salah in a number of archives, mostly public, in Rome, Florence, Budapest, New York, Philadelphia and Jerusalem – is written in Italian. The texts are divided into two sections — *Letters from Marco Mortara* (pp. 59-218) and *Letters to Marco Mortara* (pp. 219-254). The editor made the meritorious attempt to reconstruct the ongoing conversations and their contexts. In this way, the book manages to shed light not only on the single figure of Marco Mortara, but also on some of his most frequent correspondents, including in particular the very well known scholar Samuel David Luzzatto and David Graziadio Viterbi (1815-1879), who studied in the same years at the Rabbinical College of Padua and was rabbi of Padua until 1867. Salah provides also a useful apparatus of footnotes and comments. Mortara's correspondents are almost exclusively Jews: it is an interesting and meaningful fact, but this should not make us think of a socio-cultural isolation from the broader Italian context. This *corpus* of letters might not be complete, and in any case it is only one of the multiple lenses through which we can observe and interpret the life of an individual.

The introduction signed by Salah, which occupies the first 55 pages of the book, is a thorough critical essay and doesn't limit itself to an accurate description of the sources. It reminds us, and rightly so, of the importance of the letter as the main medium for cultural circulations and intellectual exchanges in the XIXth century. The debates on Judaism, Reform, assimilation, and later on Zionism were no exception, and the sections dedicated to letters from contributors and readers that we find in all the major Jewish journals of the time confirm this idea. Unfortunately, very little of this

material has been studied, and as far as the Italian rabbis are concerned, Salah's research is unique.

In Mortara's letters, one of the most interesting topics is the attitude of the Italian rabbinate toward Reform, as it is emphasized by the subtitle of the book, *An Italian Rabbi between Reform and Orthodoxy*. If we consider the Jewish Reform as a movement/interpretation that questions "the authority of the canonical texts of Judaism," "the function of the rabbis" and "the observance of the precepts that have acquired legal force on the basis of tradition and rabbinic authority" (p. 40), it is necessary to reiterate a widely known concept, namely that a real reform movement did not catch on in Italy. This does not mean, however, that what was happening elsewhere in Europe, and especially in Germany, was uninfluential. On the contrary, it was heatedly discussed. Salah's thesis, in line with what had already been noted by other scholars, is that the "reform failed to take root in Italy not because it was too foreign to the Italian Jewish *Sonderweg*, but because it was orthodoxy that ended up absorbing part of its programs, as it happened, though in different ways, even in Germany with the neo-orthodoxy movement" (p. 41). From these premises, and an accurate reading of his letters and writings, Mortara emerges as a conservative orthodox, but favorable to a non-dogmatic interpretation of certain rites and rules, open to certain adaptations to or compromises with modernity and with the new condition of the Jews as citizens of a modern nation-state. A plastic response to changes had been — it is claimed by Mortara and others — a characteristic of Talmudic Judaism. In this sense, and only in this sense, he considered himself and was perceived as a progressive "reformer." He was the main (unsuccessful) promoter of the idea of a rabbinical synod, to avoid the problems caused by the fragmentation of Italian religious leadership and to reach commonly accepted and authoritative decisions.

While sharing this broad interpretative approach, I think it would have been useful to explore more in depth the theme of an Italian Jewish (religious) *Sonderweg* with some comparative elements with the European context, while in fact the one I cited is the only hint we find in the Introduction of a peculiarity of Italian style Judaism and orthodoxy: it is a peculiarity which becomes more and more accentuated during the nineteenth century, in relation to the absence of a recognized and structured reform movement, and whose effects are still visible today. On the more general topic of cultural influences, I think that the observations on the mediated and filtered way in which the German debate impacted on the majority of the Italian Jewish world — much more familiar with French culture, with the exception of the areas subject to direct Austrian rule — are meaningful and would deserve more investigation. Mortara couldn't read German, but Salah notes that among the modern authors mentioned in his letters and in his printed works the most cited are Germans, followed by the French. If we find only a handful of Italians, it can be attributed to the

intellectual poverty of the Italian debate on the topics discussed in the letters and in the scientific works, in which non-Jewish politics and culture are almost absent. This does not mean that Mortara was not fully implanted into the Italian culture and society of his time. This is probably the most relevant limit of the book, or rather of the introductory essay: the Italian dimension of Mortara's life and culture is completely missing. This *lacuna* is particularly striking because his life crossed all the major events of the Risorgimento and of the cultural, political, administrative and legislative unification of the peninsula. In this way, the essay fails to capture a crucial side of the character and its analysis remains incomplete. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that the volume is the result of a long and difficult research (as the construction of a *corpus* of letters always is); it finally makes these sources available in a serious and scrupulous edition, and its importance for scholars of Italian Jewry is unquestionable.

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